



THE ARCHBISHOP
OF YORK

Archbishop Stephen gave the sermon during the Christmas Day Service broadcast on BBC Radio 4 from York Minster. This follows in full. Also available on the [BBC website](#)

There was no room at the inn. That's one of the first things small children learn about the Christmas story. Many learn very little else; reflecting what many of us, old and young, tend to do when God comes knocking. We turn God away. God – and God's values of peace and justice, God's uncomfortable habit of welcoming everyone and of treating everyone the same – are deeply disturbing in a world which loves to build barriers and pass judgment.

So we draw the curtains. Check the locks. Put the chain across the door. Set the alarm. Make excuses. Say we're busy. Pretend we're out. Ask God politely to move along. Imagine we are in charge ourselves, and peek through the net curtains to check God's gone somewhere else.

We don't want God on the telly. Well, not too much. We think a happy Christmas can be found in other ways, and any number of adverts sell us dreams of wealth and beauty and the products that will deliver them and the happiness that comes with them. So please don't disturb these aspirations with something that tells us we may have to wait, or make do with what we've got, and that happiness might actually be found in giving. Especially not at Christmas.

And we don't want God in politics. Well, not too much. And only if God supports my opinions. That's what my happiness depends on.

And we don't want God in our homes. Fairy lights, tinsel, Christmas trees, yuletide logs, reindeers whose red noses glow in the dark, and Father Christmas, yes they are very welcome, these are what makes Christmas happy, and if this disquieting story of a teenage mum and a backstreet birth, a poll-tax summons and a tyrant king, a bloody genocide and a refugee family fleeing for their lives, must intrude on our celebrations, then let it be that cosy, neutral, Disneyland version that sits on the mantelpiece and bathed in beatific light won't harm anyone.

And, saddest of all, we don't seem to want God in our hearts. Why? Because they are too full of the worship of other gods. The gods of celebrity, the gods of pride, the gods of plenty and excess whose festivals of Black Friday and Cyber Monday, Panic Tuesday, re-mortgage the house Wednesday and Boxing Day sales we must faithfully observe.

Oh, poor sinners that we are this Christmas in a country disturbed by unhealthy divisions and divisive slogans in a world engulfed again by war and conflict: never more in need of this fantastic story of love, yet never more distant from its firm and particular embrace.

God is knocking. And God can offer a peace beyond understanding and a happiness as well. That's what Wendy discovered. Furloughed from her job, she approached her local church in Hull to find out how she could get involved serving her community. In that service, establishing a

foodbank network she came to serve many, and discovered the one who is the servant of all, the Christ child we welcome today. She welcomed Jesus into her life, and joy and renewal followed. God can break down barriers, close distances of separation in a moment. Yes, I know we have all put so much insulation round our lives that it is sometimes hard to hear God; I know that we think life is easier or even better without God, but the message of Christmas is that God is among us, and in the most unlikely and surprising ways, offering the world a different future. God is in the Christ child born of Mary, born as one of us.

Brothers and sisters, God is knocking at our door. If we open the door, God will come in and eat with us. God will help us see ourselves differently. God will help us see the world differently, for it is God’s peace that the world so urgently needs, a peace we cannot manufacture for ourselves. Perhaps that’s one of the messages that ancient practice of the child bishop we heard about earlier brings. Edward enjoyed running York Minster for a day, and his essay longed for a better world, a world turned upside down where the powerless become the powerful, and the powerful gladly take on the humility of those at the bottom of the pile. Perhaps that upside-downness is the kind of peace we long for, in our better selves. A true happiness. A joy that will last longer than the Turkey. And with more fizz than Prosecco.

Wise men and women still look for this peace, still crave this joy. Shepherds and all sorts of unlikely people are always welcome. Angels sang about it then. Their song is still alive today echoed in our carolling. So, invite God in this Christmas. You will be pleasantly surprised, though he may bring a few others with him and they won’t be the people we expect, but they will be the people in whom we will find real peace and joy, the very peace and joy that eludes us, that we often look for elsewhere, and without which the whole world flounders.

Then that carol we sang in childhood will be real, changing us into children of God –

Be near me, Lord Jesus; I ask thee to stay

Close by me for ever, and love me, I pray.



(Clockwise from top left) Lay Evangelist Kia; the team at St Philip's Food Bank Service, Hull; volunteer Wendy; the Archbishop speaks to the Chorister Bishop, Edward Sangwine.

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